

The poems of Sulpicia

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The following six poems have been transmitted through the ages in a body of poetry now known as the *Corpus Tibullianum*. They may or may not represent the total known output of a relatively well-connected woman called Sulpicia, born in the middle of the 1st cent. BC.¹ In various 19th cent. editions of Tibullus² the poems are in Book 4 and numbered 7 to 11. They are among other poems in which Sulpicia and Cerinthus occur, which seem to be the work of Tibullus, whereas this group seems to have been composed by Sulpicia. The Latin text printed below is from the Latin Library, where the poems are described as *Epistulae*.

¹ Not surprisingly perhaps, the proponents of Sulpicia's authorship are women, the opponents men. A useful book to consult: Stevenson, Jane: *Women Latin Poets. Language, Gender, and Authority, from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2005), especially ch.1: "Classical Latin Women Poets" (31-48)

² For example, those of Heyne and Wunderlich (1818) and Lachmann and Dissen (1835).

Poem One

Tandem venit amor, qualem texisse pudori
 quam nudasse alicui sit mihi fama magis.
Exorata meis illum Cytherea Camenis
 adtulit in nostrum deposuitque sinum.
Exsolvit promissa Venus: mea gaudia narret,
 dicetur siquis non habuisse sua.
Non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis,
 ne legat id nemo quam meus ante, velim,
sed peccasse iuvat, vultus componere famae
 taedet: cum digno digna fuisse ferar.

*At length love has come. To conceal it
Would be more shameful than to reveal it.
Cytherea, implored in my poems,
Has brought it and put it in my lap.
Venus has fulfilled her promises. Let her tell of my joy,
To those who may not have their own.
I would not wish to send anything in a sealed letter,
So that everyone can read it before my love.
It feels good to have done something wrong.
It is tedious to pretend.
I want people to know
That I, an honourable, have been with him, an honourable man.*

Poem Two

Invisus natalis adest, qui rure molesto
 et sine Cerintho tristis agendus erit.
Dulcius urbe quid est? an villa sit apta puellae
 atque Arrentino frigidus amnis agro?
Iam nimium Messalla mei studiose, quiescas,
 heu tempestivae, saeve propinque, viae!
Hic animum sensusque meos abducta relinquo,
 arbitrio quamvis non sinis esse meo.

*The dreaded birthday is at hand, and I will have to spend it
Without Cerinthus, miserably in the tiresome countryside.
What is more pleasant than the city? Is the countryside a good place for a girl?*

*The cold river on the Arretine field ?
Uncle Messalla, you worry too much about me.
But you should not.
It is not the time for travelling, my hard-hearted relative.
You may not allow me to decide for myself,
But I will leave my feelings and my heart here when I am taken away.*

Poem Three

Scis iter ex animo sublatum triste puellae?
natali Romae iam licet esse suo.
Omnibus ille dies nobis natalis agatur,
qui nec opinanti nunc tibi forte venit.

*Do you know that your girlfriend has been spared this harsh journey ? That she
can spend her birthday in Rome ? Let us spend my birthday, which is now yours
unexpectedly and quite by chance, together.*

Poem Four

Gratum est, securus multum quod iam tibi de me
permittis, subito ne male inepta cadam.
Sit tibi cura togae potior pressumque quasillo
scortum quam Servi filia Sulpicia:
Solliciti sunt pro nobis, quibus illa dolori est,
ne cedam ignoto, maxima causa, toro.

*It is pleasing to see how unconcerned you,
Who take so many liberties with me,
Are that I do not suddenly stumble and fall.
To see that your attention to the toga and the strumpet
Carrying her basket of wool
Is stronger than Sulpicia the daughter of Servius.
There is concern on my behalf,
The greatest cause for concern being that
I will have to yield to an unknown bed.*

Poem Five

Estne tibi, Cerinthe, tuae pia cura puellae,
quod mea nunc vexat corpora fessa calor?
A ! ego non aliter tristes evincere morbos

optarim, quam te si quoque velle putem.
At mihi quid prosit morbos evincere, si tu
nostra potes lento pectore ferre mala?

*Cerinthus, do you worry about your girlfriend,
Now that her body is wearied by a fever ?
I wish to overcome my illness
Only if I think that you want me to.
But what good will it do me to overcome my illness
If you are able to bear it with such indifference ?*

Poem Six

Ne tibi sim, mea lux, aequae iam fervida cura
ac videor paucos ante fuisse dies,
si quicquam tota commisi stulta iuventa,
cuius me fatear paenituisse magis,
hesterna quam te solum quod nocte reliqui,
ardorem cupiens dissimulare meum.

*Light of my life, I am afraid that I am no longer
The raging love I think I was several days ago.
I ask myself if I have ever done anything in my young life more stupid,
For which I may say that I have never been sorrier,
Than leaving you yesterday evening
Because I did not wish to reveal my passion.*

Notes

Poem One seems to be a declaration that Sulpicia has just enjoyed her first night of bliss with Cerinthus. Some of the language seems rather tortuous, but it also seems relatively clear that she feels no shame and sees no reason to pretend that she has not enjoyed amorous bliss with her beloved.

Poems Two and Three depict Sulpicia as very unwilling to be parted from Cerinthus

Poem Four is about the unfaithfulness, either in fact or intention, of Cerinthus, whose eye seems to wander to both courtesans (who wear a *toga* and not the matronly *stola*) and servant girls, described unflatteringly as strumpets (*scortum*). Sulpicia warns Cerinthus that her socially elevated relatives are worried that a member of their family might have to give way to a social inferior ('unknown bed'): she uses a phrase that conjures up the lawcourts *maxima causa* in what looks like a threat to the young man.

Poem Five seems to focus on the young man's indifference to Sulpicia's illness.

Poem Six seems to continue the theme of dampening ardour, this time on the part of Sulpicia, who apparently left her loved one the previous evening, because she had not wanted to reveal her passion.

There is a sort of neat line of development in the relationship between the two

- the raptures of physical encounter experienced by the young woman
- reluctance to be away from the object of her adoration
- suspicion that he has developed a wandering eye
- concern over the young man's indifference to her physical well-being
- unwillingness to show the young man how passionate about him she is, because he may not be as passionate about her.

Of course, this story is totally one-sided.